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SUNDAY, MAY 8, 2011

## Travel

### CHOICE TABLES



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FROM LEFT Trout at Cakes & Ale; feta snack and a salad at Miller Union; "jars" at Empire State South contain snacks like peanut hummus, bacon marmalade, pickles and pimento cheese.

## Atlanta Serves Sophisticated Southern

By KIM SEVERSON

WHEN I moved to Atlanta from New York late last year, I made a few rookie food mistakes. I would corner the dry cleaner, the preschool teacher, every food friend I knew. "So where can I find great barbecue?" I asked.

The answer? You can't. Atlanta isn't a barbecue town. That's not to say you can't find it. But there is no authentic style of Georgia barbecue. Rather, it borrows from the states around it.

Also, Atlanta is only vaguely a fried chicken town. Certainly, delicious fried chicken is not hard to find, but suggest to an Atlantian that the city is a place of biscuits and chicken and, well, you'll discover just how thin the skin gets here in the Southern sun.

I compounded these beginner blunders when I suggested, via Twitter, that I missed the food in New York. Kaboom! A local columnist wrote an open letter condemning me. The Southern food experts in this close-knit town handed out the pitchforks and torches.

Atlanta, it turns out, is a bit defensive about its food. It shouldn't be. Of course, Atlanta is not New York in the way San Francisco is not Los Angeles and Chicago is not New Orleans, even though all those cities are constantly vying for some kind of food supremacy. (New Orleans is an exception; it just hangs out all smug and orders another round of oysters and Sazeracs.)

But, over the past few years, Atlanta

has experienced a notable upgrade in ambition that reflects a new kind of sophisticated Southern sensibility centered on the farm but experienced in the city.

It builds, in part, on the formidable foundation created by Atlanta chefs like Scott Peacock and Anne Quatrano. And just to add some weight to the argument that the city is becoming a serious national player, consider that it is home to eight contenders in the "Top Chef" franchise, and on May 19, it will host a huge food and wine festival focused on the South, sponsored by Food & Wine and Travel & Leisure magazines.

Southern food, at least as expressed by a handful of restaurants in Atlanta these days, is farm-driven. Atlanta chefs continue to explore ways to mix technique and trend with country roots. Always, vegetables play a central role. After all, the South had a farm-to-table culture before those upstarts on the West Coast even planted their first crop of organic mesclun greens.

But more than that, the city expresses an intimacy at the table that is downright Italian in its broad generosity and love. Atlanta, despite a population filled with carpetbaggers like me, is a place of family, where things get worked out around the table and everyone always wants to eat.

Here are three restaurants, opened in the past few years, that might give a traveler a good taste of how Atlanta is interpreting what Southern food means.

### Miller Union

Miller Union has the confidence of a good-looking high school student with a really generous personality: a charming, polished beacon on the West End, a part of Atlanta that has transformed itself from an industrial other-side-of-the-

tracks wasteland to the place to open a restaurant.

Steven Satterfield, the chef, and Neal McCarthy, the manager, are running a restaurant that has gotten more attention in the last year or so than any other in the city. Martha Stewart loves it (she hosted Mr. Satterfield on her show). The major food magazines love it (Food & Wine included it in a Southern cooking roundup). The publicity machine behind it is good — so good that the buzz sometimes seems to work against it. People say it's overrated, too simple,

too, well, popular.

But the people behind the restaurant don't care about all that, and neither should you. They just love what they do and the food is often exactly what I want to eat.

Mr. Satterfield, a Georgia native who spent time cooking at Watershed, a much-loved restaurant where Mr. Peacock was the chef, is driven by vegetables, herbs and the purity of the plate. Things should taste the way they do when they come from the ground (or

the pig or the chicken, for that matter). As he sees it, his job to coax the flavors along.

A feta snack — essentially buttery, salty cheese and crunchy vegetables — hits almost every table. But the Southern pantry also gets infused into plenty of dishes. Pickled vegetables are regulars. Delightful little fritters made from grits and country ham are made creamy with local raw-milk tomme cheese. Sorghum sweetens pork belly.

The most discussed dish might be his egg baked in celery cream. People argue that it's too subtle — but I dare you to resist dipping corners of grilled bread into the rich fondue that results when the yolk is broken.

A couple of pieces of chicken pan-seared to a perfect crispness arrive with whichever vegetables came through the back door — on a recent visit, spring peas and Vidalia onions. It's pure. It's simple. It's delicious.

You can make even better use of those vegetables with a Southern vegetable plate that seems always to feature some kind of braised greens. It's a dish that will only get better as the growing season progresses.

Desserts come to table like dear friends. Lauren Raymond, the pastry chef, puts out crisps and simple fruit dishes and puddings. The ice cream, which at lunch gets turned into fantastic sandwiches with flavors like Almond Joy, is worth a scoop.

Miller Union, 999 Brady Avenue NW, Atlanta; (678) 733-8550; millerunion.com. An average meal for two is about \$75.

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